

Faculty Work Comprehensive List

10-29-2018

Visual Art: Cultivating Christian Viewers

David Versluis

Dordt College, david.versluis@dordt.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#), and the [Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Versluis, D. (2018). Visual Art: Cultivating Christian Viewers. Retrieved from https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/987

This Blog Post is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Work Comprehensive List by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

Visual Art: Cultivating Christian Viewers

Abstract

"People cannot always explain visual images literally; many ontological images and concepts are highly metaphorical."

Posting about interpreting visual works of art from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/visual-art-cultivating-christian-viewers/>

Keywords

In All Things, metaphor in art, visual communication in art, design theory

Disciplines

Art and Design | Christianity

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).



October 29, 2018

Visual Art: Cultivating Christian Viewers

David Versluis

To commence the art exhibition schedule in Dordt's Campus Center Gallery this year, the art department displayed The Donna Spaan Collection of Contemporary Art. The theme of Spaan's collection is "Light: God's Eternal Presence." She says that the collection was motivated in part by attending the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship symposium a few years ago: "In the art gallery, I heard symposium participants—church people—talking intensely together about the artworks on display. They were discussing them in a very literal way. And I thought, 'Maybe a way to move people out of that worldview would be an art collection that opens up their imaginations.'"

Spaan's statement reminds me that people cannot always explain visual images literally; many ontological images and concepts are highly metaphorical. Metaphors are conceptual; they are not just a matter of words. According to Lakoff and Johnson, "The essence of the metaphor is understanding and experiencing one thing in terms of another."¹

In visual art, metaphors are directly correlated to the design process and linked to form-making. It is through the potential of the metaphor that an image can transcend the vividness and veracity of form.

Some of the basic concepts or principles that students learn in design theory is that the aesthetics of formal elements comprise the tried and true adages of "unity in diversity," "repetition with variety," or "harmonious disorder." The pattern is the way to establish formal unity between the similarity of visual elements and the different sizes, shapes, textures, and the intrinsic colors in the picture. The pattern does not have to be obvious in the final result; rather, it could be allusive by the balance of the pictorial subjects and principles. However, often art viewers have been conditioned to not recognize the visual

language—the interplay of continuity and disruption. Speaking into this idea, George Nelson in his book *How to See* writes, “Just how much any of us sees of the most intimate personal environments is an open question. Can you describe to colors and pattern of any rug in your dwelling? The wallpaper in the bedroom? When were they last looked at?”²

In addition, the British author named Joyce Cary brilliantly described one of the best ways to look at a picture in his novel entitled *The Horse’s Mouth*.³ The main character and narrator is the artist-painter, Mr. Gulley Jimson. In one scene, Jimson and his friend Cokey are looking at one of his paintings and all she can see is “a totty.” “You don’t know what a picture is, Cokey,” says Jimson.

Jimson wonderfully explains the visual language/visual pattern of a painting by first reciting a passage from the poem, “Milton” by Romantic poet and artist, William Blake:

...And the sons of Los build moments and minutes and hours
And days and months and years and ages and periods,
wondrous buildings...

...I’ll show you how to look at a picture, Cokey. Don’t look at it. Feel it with your eye.... And first you feel the shapes in the flat—the patterns, like a carpet.... And you feel it in the round. Not as if it were a picture of anyone. But a coloured and raised map. You feel all the rounds, the smooths, the cools and warms. The colors and textures. There’s hundreds of little differences all fitting in together.⁴

Carl Sandburg once wrote in his *Complete Poems* that, “Poetry [visual art] is the opening and closing of a door, leaving those who look through to guess about what is seen during a moment.” With this passage in mind, it takes a certain kind of humility to view an artwork by not “reading into it,” but better yet, taking time to cultivate a process of “drawing out” the significance of the artwork.

FOOTNOTES

1. Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. University of Chicago Press, 2003, p. 5. Print.
2. Nelson, George. *How to See: A Guide to Reading Our Manmade Environment*. Boston, Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1977. 224. Print.
3. Before deciding to be a writer, Joyce Cary was an art student for several years. *The Horse’s Mouth* is the third story in a trilogy and is full of British irony, wit, and humor that is summed-up by the idiom of the title. In addition, the novel

is a unique critique of society—the art world, the public, and the artist. Sir Alec Guinness wrote a screenplay based on the novel and starred in the 1958 movie with the same title.

4. Cary, Joyce. *The Horse's Mouth*, Harper and Brothers, 1959. 90-98. Print.